

MORAL PANIC GRIPS PENNSYLVANIA

Moral panic is the term used by sociologists to describe what happens when social problems become highly exaggerated, often by the media. Setting off the alarms, without due cause, not only distorts the truth about existing conditions, it triggers an overreaction. This is what a moral panic does, and it is going on right now in Pennsylvania. But it is not reporters who are arousing unnecessary fears, it is lawmakers and activists. Worse, they are acting like bigots.

Consider the following. Alleged cases of sexual abuse at a Catholic high school in the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown were referred by the local D.A.'s office to the state Attorney General's office. Let's stop right there. How often is the state AG's office asked to accept cases involving one high school, and how often does it comply? How common is it for the plaintiffs' lawyer to come from out-of-state to handle the case, especially when it is known that the Church-suing millionaire attorney has a tainted record?

It gets worse. How often does such a lawsuit extend to a grand jury investigation of the entire organization, involving persons wholly unconnected to the original case? How common is it that such a probe would extend back to World War II? Most important, why is it that no other organization in the state has been subjected to such an investigation, especially when the problem is raging elsewhere? To be exact, why is there no probe of sexual misconduct by public school teachers, rabbis, ministers, et al.?

Bad as this is, nothing tops the response of lawmakers. Leading the way is Rep. Mark Rozzi, a moral panic practitioner par excellence. "We are talking about an epidemic here in the state of Pennsylvania," he says. Not only is this

irresponsible hyperbole, he, and his allies, are phonies: They do not want to go to the heart of the “epidemic”—they only want dioceses to be investigated! The public schools, they say, should get a pass.

Stay tuned. The Catholic League will have much more to say about this issue, and we won't limit ourselves to news releases.